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The Force Design 2030 of the U.S. Marine Corps as a product of strategic planning, a reference for the processes of change of the Spanish military tool?

Abstract

The confirmed “era of competition”, with the irruption of war in Europe and the disruptive way in which current conflicts are fought, is pushing the surrounding nations to update their security strategies with new approaches. Spain is no stranger to these influences. The U.S. Marine Corps *Force Design 2030* case study seems to offer a good comparative framework for any force design process. The appreciated continuity in its planning process, guided by the assertive political will of the pivot to Asia, has led its Defense to act accordingly to answer Chinese competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The Marines, a service with a markedly expeditionary character, have been the protagonists of one of the most accentuated and audacious processes of change in recent times with the aim of recovering their eroded deterrence capacity. This article analyzes the vertical coherence and definition of its planning process as a sample of its degree of validity as a strategic product, in order to subsequently extract potential references applicable to the Spanish case.

Keywords

Geopolitics, military problem, adaptation, military capabilities, deterrence

Cite this article:

Alegre. C. (2025). “The Force Design 2030 of the U.S. Marine Corps as a product of strategic planning, reference for the processes of change of the Spanish military tool?”. *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, No. 25, pp. 447-482.

“There has always been a temptation for armies to be “all-purpose” (...) However, like the Swiss Army knife, neither its screwdriver, its scissors nor its blade can compete with “professional” tools specialized in a single function. At the extreme end is the possibility that what is intended to serve for everything, ends up serving for nothing”.

Carlos Javier Frías Sánchez in “¿Por qué es importante la doctrina militar?” (article dated May 14, 2014, in *defensa.com*).

I Introduction

“I am convinced that the attributes of our current force are no longer what the nation requires of the Marine Corps (USMC).” So bluntly stated its commandant, General Berger, in “The Case for Change”¹ (2020). Assuming, and declaring, that his force is “not organized, trained, equipped or oriented” to meet the demands of the operational environment requires a clear strategic orientation, as well as a sharp critical eye. And the context is at the height of what the RAND *think tank*² considers to be the moment of greatest strategic need since the end of the Cold War (Ochmanek *et al.*, 2023). On its success in aligning *ends, ways and means*³ depends on minimizing the risk in the most relevant theater for its national security (Lykke, 1997 pp. 183-186), that of the Indo-Pacific in competition with China.

Precisely, the effort of adaptation to the new environment being undertaken by the USMC to compete in a contested maritime environment is the focus of this article’s analysis. Its “Force Design 2030 [FD2030]” is the result of defense planning that, guided by the “*pivot to Asia*” policy, seems to meet the characteristics that all force design must fulfil. That is, it has emerged from a process of adequate strategic definition and vertical coherence. Thus, it starts with the expression of the political will that identifies national interests together with the description of the strategic environment (section 3.1), the development of the defense strategy (3.2), the formulation of the “operational problem” to be solved (3.3), the response in the form of an “operational concept” and the military capabilities derived from it (3.4), and the consequent force design (3.5) (Arteaga, Fojón, 2007). Finally, two tables are offered, one summarizing this process, together with another on the Spanish case, providing qualitative and quantitative data to better justify the conclusions obtained.

If proven consistent as a product of strategic planning, it will be offered as a valid comparative framework that can support other force designs.

1 David H. Berger, “The Case for Change. Meeting the Principal Challenges Facing the Corps,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (June 2020), pp 8-12.

2 It is an influential *think tank* that has guided US foreign policies since the beginning of the Cold War.

3 Aims, ways and means.

2 Theoretical framework: strategic planning in the era of competition and its vertical coherence

We find ourselves in a world undergoing a Great Transformation (Lamo de Espinosa, 2021, chap. 3) “dominated by States” (Baqués, 2021b) in which, as Colin S. Gray predicted in “Another Bloody Century”, rivalry and unilateralism predominate. The mode of action of international actors is confirmed through the language of geopolitical competition [*security competition*] where⁴ all relationship mechanisms are “instrumentalized” and individual interests prevail (Leonard, 2021; Mahbubani, 2018). That rivalry manifests itself in all shades of gray from peace to war including “economic or media competitions (...) that will be subordinated to grand, even maximalist, political objectives”⁵. Baqués (2021b) stresses realistically that a world like today’s, with many centers of power is, “in practice, the most unstable –because it is volatile and unpredictable– of all imaginable worlds”.

In an era where increasing rivalry leads to “hypercompetition”, it seems that one can only prepare for it or, “fall into irrelevance” (Borrell, 2021). The revival of war in Europe, another symptom of the “world coming to an end” (Pardo de Santayana, 2019), has brought back large-scale conflict as a political tool and signals the erosion of Western deterrence power. The nations of our environment are pushed to review their strategies and adapt the design of their military tools, “poorly prepared” for the current scenario where deterrence has failed (Calvo Albero, 2024a: 9; Nagl, Crombe, 2024). Of the range of assessments of such a war capability, the RAND Corporation in its monograph *Inflection Point, How to Reverse the Erosion of U.S. and Allied Military Power and Influence* is one of the most pessimistic. The “superiority has disappeared, certainly vis-à-vis China, but also in some ways vis-à-vis other less powerful adversaries”, and “is not coming back”⁶. And they prescribe, in return, new approaches that make it possible to compete and, if necessary, to fight (Ochmanek *et al.*, 2023; pp. vii-xii). It is the rivalry with the Asian giant⁷ that gives context to this article from the prism of military tool design.

4 In the English-speaking world, we speak of *weaponization*, i.e. the “instrumentalization” of relationships for competitive purposes.

5 Such as “eroding the credibility of antagonists, provoking the breakup of rival alliances, fomenting separatist causes among competitors” (p. 5).

6 “That superiority is gone, surely with respect to China but in significant ways with respect to the forces of other, less powerful adversaries as well, and it is not coming back” (Ochmanek *et al.*, 2023; p. viii).

7 The academic literature on the probabilities of a large-scale conflict between the two powers is abundant, with two general positions. On one side of the scale, the obvious war power of the US, the inherent disincentive to a confrontation between two nuclear players, and the traditional prudence and strategic patience of Beijing; and on the other side: the military option of annexation of Taiwan (given its non-“peaceful rise”), or Washington being drawn into the Thucydides trap. If we keep this in mind, everything currently points to a low probability of open war (Luttwak, 2024; Calvo Albero, 2023, min.65-68; Castellort, 2021). Nevertheless, the aforementioned RAND monograph warns of the dangerous moment in which international relations find themselves.

In order to adapt to this competition, the States considered “actors” apply a sincere, realistic vision, far from clichés, offering an “accurate” strategic panorama (Jordán in Baqués and Fojón, 2023: 67; Arteaga, Fojón, 2007: 124). Based on this recognition, they express their political will by incorporating their “national interests, their geographical realities and territorial security, framing their grand strategy, their alliance structure (...) and potential challenges” (Hoffman in Hooker *et al.*, 2016: 18). This process is doctrinally collected by authors such as Murdock (2004) in “Improving the Practice of National Security Strategy”, Hooker *et al.*, (2016) in “Charting a Course, Strategic Choices for a New Administration”, or at the national level, by Arteaga and Fojón (2007), with “El planeamiento de la política de defensa y seguridad en España”. A process that, if followed without discontinuities, makes it possible to formulate a coherent strategy.

This strategic *continuum* is what Castilla Barea,⁸ considers to be the basis for “consistency” to “ensure effective capability planning”. Specifically, the necessary “vertical coherence” is expressed as the “traceability” of “strategic concepts, operational concepts, key missions and tasks, as well as their capability requirements” (Castilla Barea, 2024: 16). It is this *top-down and bottom-up* “coherence” that is the dependent variable established to analyze the planning leading to FD2030.

2.1 From homeland security strategies to force designs

In this field, political will is usually expressed explicitly in the form of security strategies (such as the National Security Strategy [NSS] of the case study, or the Spanish National Security Strategy [ESN]). Or, implicitly, it can be deduced from their actions vis-à-vis interests or in the formation of alliances and pacts. In one way or another, the political guide must be sufficiently clear for the *departments* [ministries] to draft their subordinate directives. It starts from the premise that “a government must establish what position its state should occupy in the international system”. This is followed by the identification of its “main problems, interests, priorities, allies and values in external action”, as well as “what degree of force it is prepared to use [and] what level of military effort it is prepared to undertake”. Or in other words, establishing “political priority, determining objectives, setting needs and enabling possible resources” to align means and ways with ends (Fojón, 2019: 17; in other words, Colom, 2021a: 16 and 2020: 7; Arteaga, 2022 and 2021; Calvo Albero, 2020a: 10; Hooker *et al.*, 2016: 38).

⁸ The author describes “vertical coherence” based on the works of Colin Gray and Tagarev on the link between strategy and defense planning in the theoretical framework of his doctoral thesis “From defense policy to defense planning”. Also from the etymological point of view, “coherent” being considered any planning whose “parts fit well together”, “vertical” being specified when programs and projects, and their implementation, are consistent “upwards” with the strategic and defense planning orientations (p. 44).

“The determination of a country’s national interest is neither self-evident nor easy to specify (...) [,] it can be conceived as the coherent and organized set of established ends (...). In turn, the general purposes are configured as a series of general effects that are intended to be achieved, maintained or improved to ensure the continuity of the country (...) and for which both society and the State that represents it are willing to mobilize their main resources, ultimately risking their own existence and sovereignty” (Baqués and Fojón, 2023: 203).

The preparation of thematic strategies follows. In the defense framework, the National Defense Strategies (NDS) or National Defense Directives (DDN), products of strategic planning (Figure 1) that must set the strategic-military objectives subordinated to the “grand strategy” (Arteaga and Fojón, 2007: 30, 151-159). Thus, once the goals have been established and prioritized, the best alignment of ways and means will depend directly on the degree of assertiveness of the political guide and the accuracy of the description of the geopolitical panorama. This sequence is the one that should give way to formulate the “problem to be solved by Defense” or, in short, the “military problem” (Fojón, 2019: 5).



Figure 1. The strategic pyramid. Source: Arteaga and Fojón, 2007

In public policy, since a simplification of an extremely complex world is required, problems are posed through their conceptualization. A “military problem” should be understood as the enunciation of a “functional or operational” scenario that requires a systemic response that “identifies the needs, capabilities and responsibilities” to be integrated (Arteaga, Fojón, 2007: 206). In parallel, Krepinevich calls “operational challenges” those “imperative problems posed by adversaries at the operational level”⁹. He considers that correctly identifying them allows focusing the efforts of the military apparatus since “the more precise and defined they are, the greater the probability of successfully facing them” (Krepinevich, 2023, ch. 11).¹⁰

⁹ “Compelling real-world problems posed by adversaries at the operational (or campaign) level of war”.

¹⁰ The American author uses *challenge* as a synonym for problem.

From this approach, a solution must then be developed and implemented in the form of an operational concept, or “line of action designed to achieve the military objective” (Lykke, 1997: 184; or, Sabatier, 2007: 3). This is the basis for the choice of capabilities to be assembled by the military tool of a State, and which will be organized by a force design as the ultimate product of the process. This “template” is the one that will be superimposed on the path followed by the US administration through its 2022 security strategy (the most recent) and defense strategy (2022, the most recent) in which the FD2030 is framed.

Next, the definition and vertical coherence of the selected case study is analyzed.

3 The Road to the U.S. Marine Corps *FD2030*

3.1 *The political will of the “pivot to Asia” through the National Security Strategies.*

The last three editions of the NSS (Trump, Biden and Biden legislatures)¹¹ embody a vision of the global security environment in which the “free and open order” is being challenged. The reason is made explicit: the revisionism of China and Russia framed in the *security competition* or *great power competition*¹². But it is the former who, despite shared interests¹³, represents the “greatest and most serious geopolitical challenge” to U.S. security by pursuing a reshaping of the established order contrary to its liberal values (NSS, 2022: 23-24). The *pivot to Asia* initially announced by Obama in a “subtle” approach to the Chinese rise¹⁴, has been assertively evolving to rise to the challenge. Now, the first global priority is to “dominate the competition with China [*Out-Competing China*],” especially where it is “most pronounced,” in the Indo-Pacific (NSS, 2022: 23-24). And it shields its level of ambition:

“American military power is the most powerful fighting force the world has ever known. The United States will not hesitate to use force when necessary to defend our national interests. But we will do so as a last resort and only when the objectives and mission are clear and achievable” (p. 20)¹⁵.

11 2017-21-22 editions. The 2015 edition, which still prioritized efforts to maintain the international rules-based order less assertively than in the current context, is not considered.

12 Competition between powers.

13 The interdependent factors are climate, economics and public health.

14 In fact, the term *pivot* was avoided by Obama himself, employing instead the more friendly term *re-balancing*, as a “balanced economic, diplomatic and security approach” (Lieberthal, 2011).

15 “The American military is the strongest fighting force the world has ever known. America will not hesitate to use force when necessary to defend our national interests. But we will do so as the last resort and only when the objectives and mission are clear and achievable”.

Despite this, this *grand strategy* “does not pursue a new Cold War” (p. 9)¹⁶. Although this does not prevent it from denouncing Beijing’s progressive aggressiveness following its own Asian “Monroe Doctrine” (Mearsheimer, 2010: 389). It is recognized that, given the amount of people, resources and economic activity in Eurasia, the existence of a “regional hegemon would concentrate so much power that it would threaten vital US interests”, as the Congressional Research Service report warns (O’Rourke, 2024). Consequently, to prevent China from consolidating itself as such, it channels the main objectives, proposing Integrated Deterrence as a means.

It should be mentioned that it is precisely in the Taiwan Strait, the focus of China’s territorial ambitions, where Washington’s economic and technological survival and its global credibility intersect. This island produces 37% of the world’s computer *chips*, as well as being at the forefront of the technological innovation that makes Moore’s Law possible¹⁷, on which the transatlantic power bases its economy and technological supremacy. If this flow were to be interrupted, the world would enter into crisis, and Silicon Valley’s telecommunications industry would go bankrupt because these semiconductors are its physical livelihood¹⁸. This concentration of companies on the disputed island is in turn the *silicon shield* that guarantees Taiwanese autonomy and a transcendental vulnerability for U.S. national interests (Miller, 2022).

3.2 *The National Defense Strategy, bringing definition to objectives in the Indo-Pacific*

This is the basis for the subordinate strategy, the NDS of 2022¹⁹. This strategy assumes that maintaining “peace and stability” in that region is the objective on which the “security” of the American people depends. Also, “expanding the prosperity and opportunities of its economy, and defending the democratic values of the *American way of life*” (NDS, 2022: 1, 7)²⁰. And, at the same time, it provides definition from the defense point of view to the description of the threat made by the NSS: the greatest risk to such national interest is represented by an actor that has “embarked on an ambitious expansion, modernization and diversification of its atomic forces,

16 “We also want to avoid a world in which competition escalates into a world of rigid blocs. We do not seek conflict or a new Cold War” (p. 9).

17 Prediction so far fulfilled in which, every two years, the chip’s power doubles and its size shrinks.

18 For example, a partial disruption, such as that caused by COVID, affected the production of washing machines, computers and cars, among others. *Chips* are the ubiquitous component of our era. Also in the military industry. A single *Javelin* anti-tank missile requires 200 of them (Miller, 2022: 377).

19 Last published, it contains the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and the Missile Defense Review (MRD) as complementary strategies.

20 “The Department will focus on safeguarding and advancing vital U.S. national interests. We will work (...) to: Protect the security of the American People; Expand economic prosperity and opportunity; and realize and defend the values at the heart of American way of life” (p. 1).

establishing an incipient nuclear triad ²¹ “ (p. 4), in addition to having powerful conventional forces and modes of action from the gray zone.

The NDS defines three general lines of action (LA) to protect the national interests set out in the overarching strategy. “Investment”, to improve the positioning of national companies; “alignment”, with the efforts of allies and *security partners*; and “competitiveness”, in the defense of their security. All this framed by Integrated Deterrence, especially through *campaigning*, or advanced deployment of “credible forces to ensure deterrence” and capable of counteracting the confirmed “erosion” of its military power (p.7). Degradation that is a reality according to Hoffman’s assessment: “improvements in Chinese military capabilities have completely transformed the strategic environment and weakened the military tool”, specifically in its function of “trans-narrow deterrence [of Taiwan]” (in Ochmanek *et al.*, 2023).

Indeed, Beijing is recognized as an actor that has methodically and patiently studied American *warfare*²² identifying that it has “a beginning, a development and an end” (McFate, 2019). In the face of its exquisite and highly demanding platforms in crews and maintenance, it presents a *Systems Destruction Warfare* [Warfare Against Systems]²³. Thus, the NDS recognizes that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) can impede or hinder the concentration of U.S. forces at its forward bases in the Pacific. Most especially, the closer they get to the demarcation of the first island chain, where the effects of their denial systems overlap. As direct consequence, the necessary *decisive expeditionary force*²⁴ as an enabling feature of the *American Way of War* (Cepeda, 2015: 128-131; NDS, 2022: 4), is deemed impracticable in the current environment. The “development of new operational concepts” is therefore needed as a prescription for a solution to the problem (NDS, 2022: 8)²⁵. New ways of operating across the contested spectrum, with the ability to frustrate competitors’ activities, and to deter (Mazarr, 2023: 7-12).

21 Referring to the nuclear package consisting of air-, ground- and submarine-launched weapons.

22 Its strategists propose an alternative way of competing: not to confront the US game. Following the objective already set by their last but one president, Jiang Zemin (1989-2002), to be able to “win local wars through high technology”, they intend to deny the projection of their power, to operate under their ways, and to achieve their objectives. To this end, they acknowledge that they have a new set of rules covering a wider range of activities than the merely kinetic ones preponderant in the U.S. catalog (Liang and Xiangsui, 1999).

23 It is based on gaining information superiority, employing long-range networked systems, and striking first in the exchange of salvos. In short, an asymmetric strategy in the manner of a “killer’s mace” (Pulido, 2021: 13; or Work, 2018) comprising two simultaneous performances (Krepinevitz, 2023, min.32-36; Brose, 2020): against “the nervous system” of the war machine in the intangible domains (cyber and electromagnetic) by preventing the functioning of its command and control and logistics; against the capital systems in the tangible ones (on land, its bases; at sea, its aircraft carriers; in aerospace, its communications satellites and GPS).

24 Consisting of projecting a massive force that offensively imposes a decisive victory (prior concentration on the operations board). An example is the First Gulf War, where for months logistical and preparation activities were carried out in a space close to and bordering Iraq, in an uncontested manner.

25 The NDS specifies this in its “*How we will deter*” section.

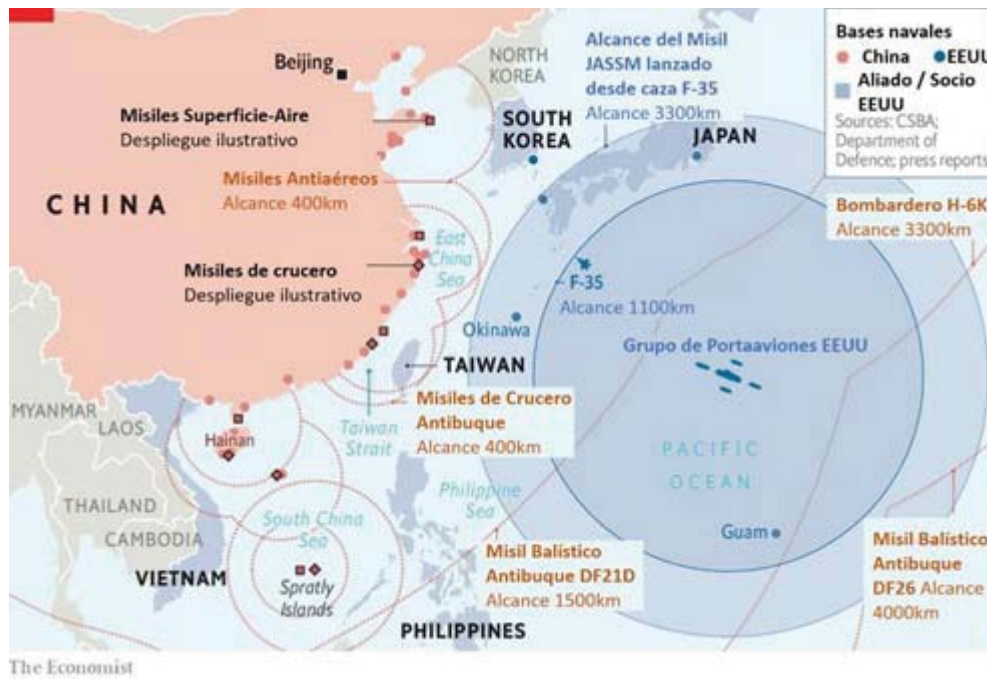


Figure 2. Translated comparison of Chinese and U.S. offensive ranges and depiction of the effects of denial on projection capability in the Indo-Pacific. Source: *The Economist*

In a defensive approach to the challenge, the defense strategy articulates Integrated Deterrence as the main tool. Its intended competitiveness requires it to be applicable *cross-strait* with the practical constraints that come with the revisionist power so close to the threatened asset. And the strategy makes it explicit: “The *Department will support Taiwan’s asymmetric self-defense*” (NDS, 2022: 15). This mode of achieving ends, comprising cost imposition and denial tactics, seems to make sense when one has gone from assuming the difficulty of “fighting two wars that would break out simultaneously” (Colom, 2015: 74) to believing that a victory cannot be achieved in the current context (Detsch, 2024). And to ensure it, the NDS reorients its services. Armies such as the *Army*, or the Marines themselves, which have been protagonists of the “counterinsurgency” of the last two decades, accustomed to operate in and from permissive contexts, must now adapt to the competition between powers (*peer-to-peer*)²⁶ where there are no longer peripheral sanctuaries to amass forces, and where the SLOC²⁷ are threatened from their very origin in national territory. It is here that the Department of Defense [DoD] proceeds to pose its “military problem” to be solved.

3.3 *The U.S. operational problem in the Indo-Pacific Theater*

Based on the definition of the strategic objectives and the description of the operational environment set forth in the NSS and specified in the NDS, the task faces two challenges. One, to come to terms with the “sea change in the way *warfare*

²⁶ Department of the Navy [DoN], 2020.

²⁷ *Sea Lines of Communication* [Líneas de Comunicación].

is conducted” that rivals are exploiting (Brose, 2020; McFate, 2019); the other, to recognize that what the nation expects of its Armed Forces “far exceeds the means available to deliver it” (Ochmanek *et al.*, 2023: vii). It is accepted that, trying to exercise the “same deterrence”, with notably “less military dominance” implies “increased risk” (Hoffman in Hooker *et al.*, 2016: 37). Therefore, continuist practices are discouraged, warning that the monopoly of capabilities –which enabled primacy in previous campaigns– has disappeared.

However, the formulation of the operational problem is not known to the public, or not available at all, as Krepinevich criticizes in the *Operational Challenges* section (chapter II) of the recent *The Origins of Victory*: “when it comes to operational challenges, the U.S. Armed Forces operate at a disadvantage. Recent administrations have been silent on the operational problems their force must prepare for, hampering the operational concept development effort.” And he elaborates: the NDS (from 2018, in effect when he produced his work) “doesn’t even define the term [operational problem]”²⁸. He argues that for a strategic development to be considered “coherent” it must formulate such problems, bearing in mind that they must involve “no more than five or six” *core operational challenges*. And they must be prioritized. To mitigate this shortcoming, he proposes the following statement:

“Deterring and, if necessary, defending U.S. allies and security partners in the Indo-Pacific region, especially those along the first island chain, from Chinese aggression and coercion (i.e., against a technologically advanced and locally superior enemy in strength) without resorting to the use of nuclear weapons. [*Deterring and, if necessary, defending U.S. allies and security partners in the Indo-Pacific region, especially those along the first island chain, from Chinese aggression and coercion (i.e., against a technically advanced, locally numerically superior enemy) without resorting to the use of nuclear weapons*]” (Krepinevich, 2023, ch. II).

This statement seems to coincide broadly with the official line expressed by the USMC Commander himself (Berger, 2020). Especially, if a deductive effort is made from the three factors that he wields to justify the implementation of FD2030:

- The first, assuming the “maturity of precision weapons” (conceptualized as the *Mature Precision Strike Regime* [MPSR]). It is seen in the form of *reconnaissance and strike* (RUK) *complexes* already consolidated both by the PLA’s available arsenal and its area denial and anti-access (A2/AD) effects²⁹ on the first island chain and beyond (Figure 2). The great profusion of AI-powered sensors

28 Unlike the definition he argues was provided in Cold War times with respect to the Soviet threat allowing the development of coherent concepts: “*defending NATO’s Central European frontiers against a numerically superior foe (Soviet Russia and its Warsaw Pact allies) in a high-intensity conflict environment while avoiding employing nuclear weapons*. This clear statement of the problem enabled the U.S. military, over the course of the forty-year standoff between the two superpowers, to develop a series of operational concepts that informed the crafting of military doctrine” (chap. II).

29 Ivorra describes in detail the systems underpinning the Chinese A2/AD.

and vectors, including hypervelocity vectors, cause the boundaries between physical domains to blur and can be threatened from the lowest levels of the conflict.³⁰

- The second, from the perspective that one must operate and be competitive in the gray zone (GZ). In particular, in the face of actions subject to a *casus belli* being able to counter *salami* and *fait accompli* tactics³¹. Actions that would require a response of such a military and logistical magnitude that would lead to a “not worth it” (2020: 10). More so when at the extreme end of an escalation would be nuclear confrontation.
- And the third, from the imperative of operating in a maritime environment. The successive chains of islands, sometimes made up of mere islets, limit land maneuvering while imposing the need for naval platforms for the projection of forces and their supply.

With all this, Berger considers that as it naturally corresponds to a corps belonging to a Navy that looks to the Indo-Pacific, “it needs to reorient itself to support it” (2020)³². Thus, the contribution of the USMC –as a service directly involved in this strategic environment– is synthesized in the need to contribute to the containment and deterrence effect as a “valuable land complement to the fleet”, in a context of “maritime campaign”, “primacy of precision weapons (MPSR)” and necessary competitiveness in the “gray zone” (Berger, 2019, 2020).

3.4 *Defense Without Dominance and the Marine Corps’ contribution with its FD2030 concept*

The answer to the “operational problem” points to a “defensive” concept. Framed in Integrated Deterrence, it pursues the invariable principles of unbalancing the cost-benefit ratio of the target at stake. To this end, it develops the same two actions of “asymmetric deterrence” (NDS, 2022: 8): by *denial* and by *resilience*. The first, sustained by preventing territorial conquest or the use of spaces that enable it; and the second, by reinforcing the ability of partners and allies in the defense role to recover quickly, recompose, and fight, even when the adversary has achieved its initial objectives (especially referring to Taiwan) (Mazarr and Ke, 2024).

30 Examples of their success are, with less evolved versions, the Ukrainian denial of the Black Sea, or the SLOC Houthi contestation just below the threshold of conflict (in both cases, carried out by mobile, suitably equipped and motivated forces).

31 The “Senkaku paradox” is made explicit, where rival targets are apparently of much lower value than a response in force would imply.

32 He defends this prioritized reorientation considering that, while other potential scenarios against Russia or North Korea would be eminently land-based, playing a supporting role, in the Chinese case they should contribute significantly to the naval campaign against an adversary that fights from inland lines and holds local superiority (Berger, 2020).

However, as noted, the lack of an official statement of the problem and its consequent Joint response can misalign (losing effectiveness) or cause unnecessary overlap (losing efficiency) of services³³. Here Hoffman considers that the main weakness of the Marines' FD2030 is precisely its lack of fit in a Joint plan (2020: 7) beyond offering itself as a complement in “perfect symbiosis” with its *Navy*.

Its new *concept of employment* provides long-range distributed lethality with survivability based on wide dispersion, a versatility of employment from naval or land-based platforms and enabled by agile projection (Department of the Navy [DoN], 2020 and 2023a). This is consistent with *Defense Without Dominance* (Mazarr, 2023): to defeat aggression (but not victory), “even from the most powerful adversaries, superiority is no longer required”. It requires that the “attitude and *posture*” and the equipment of the force be commensurate. And the *think tank*, aligned with Berger, stresses the imperative of “learning to fight in a new way” to represent a “robust obstacle” to the opponent (Ochmanek *et al.*, 2023: viii; McFate, 2019).

This “attitude+ location” is materialized through the aforementioned *campaigning*. Joint-combined action³⁴ coordinated with the different instruments of power, across the spectrum, to obtain military advantage, sowing doubt in competitors and changing perceptions; something more than military maneuvers. This *mode*, specifically applied to the Western Pacific, is designed to generate the desired denial (Van Horrnick, 2023)³⁵. And for this *posture* to be really effective, it recommends its due synchronization with the only two annual “windows” of good weather for a potential maritime and air



Figure 3. Major exercises (campaigning) with Marine contributions alongside partners and allies over, and within, the First Island Chain in the spring of 2023 from the Chinese perspective. Source: *War on the Rocks*

33 Joint developments such as the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) may be an acceptable doctrinal reference as a framework for FD2030, but it is not confined to the Indo-Pacific nor does it assign tasks and responsibilities to the services.

34 With other services and with other allied and partner armies.

35 Using a nod to war movies, “A Strait too Far” symbolizes the effect of enlarging the 180 kilometers that separate mainland China from what it considers its territory, as a target “too far away”.

invasion³⁶. This timing is intended to counteract the advantage of those who operate with local superiority and “from inland lines”, limiting the problems of those who act “7,000 miles from their coast”.

This approach is based on a Concept that posits “distributed operations”³⁷ through “*stand-in* [advanced] forces” acting on “forward operating bases”³⁸ in contested environments (within the MPSR area of influence), and enabled by active logistics in the “contact layer” (Berger, 2020: 12). This is to operate from within the Chinese A2/AD applying the same interdiction capability (Figure 2). “*Marines will now sink ships*” (Benitez, 2024) can colloquially summarize the detection-acquisition-attack process, which from an “asymmetric attrition” approach³⁹, also extends over the air domain, and to a lesser extent, the land domain. This is an obvious and marked transition for an amphibious force oriented “to act in the full range of military operations”, including the establishment of beachheads in force. Now, it is modeled according to an expeditionary concept of “archipelagic defense”⁴⁰ on the first chain of islands, at the cost of losing shock capacity.



Figure 4. Author's translation of the representation of the USMC Operational Concept showing the dispersion of its offensive vectors (distributed lethality) offering targets that are difficult to detect and not very profitable.

Source: Center for International Maritime Security

The obvious need for survivability in the aforementioned *contact zone* will be obtained by reducing detectability and its cost-effectiveness as an objective through

36 One is in May and the other in September-October, followed by rainy weather, monsoons and prohibitive seas for landing actions.

37 It seeks to reduce vulnerability by dispersing in smaller groups, but being able to “amass” fires and effects.

38 *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* (EABO).

39 It embodies the ability to prevent adversary forces from reaching their primary objectives knowing that it may be an insufficient capability to force the cessation of hostilities (Ochmanek *et al*, 2023: x).

40 Coined by Krepinevich in 2017 in a *paper* of the same name.

the independent employment of units with “low footprint” (even a reinforced section entity is mentioned). These should be capable of being projected into a contested environment and be lethal with their missile systems in UGV formats⁴¹ or modularized in *20-foot* containers. In addition, they will provide early warning to the fleet, and logistical support capability such as with expeditionary refueling of their own *stealth* aircraft (Figure 3). A transition is intended from manned to unmanned, from quantity to quality in human resource, from expensive to effective and, in short, from a general purpose *Corps* to “strategic context oriented” (Hoffman, 2020).

3.5 *New force design to regain competitiveness*

From a *concept* must be derived the military capabilities necessary for its enablement⁴². Those contemplated by *Force Design 2030* are linked to what Timothy Grayson, former director of the DARPA agency, postulates as the unpostponable migration from “dominance to lethality” in U.S. strategy. Thus, missile defense, ship and aircraft strike defense, advanced logistics and C4ISR are incorporated⁴³. Its “distributed and networked” operation requires *mission command*⁴⁴ down to the lowest level. The only valid command modality for Berger in the face of a decentralized and atomized deployment of multi-domain units under the responsibility of *junior* officers. A leap (although not explicitly stated) towards the *mosaic* (Pulido, 2021)⁴⁵. In parallel, this new concept discards, not without controversy, the inter-weapon combat capability, or that of “attacking or defending territories” at brigade or division level (Reese *et al.*, 2024; Macander and Hwang, 2022; Bruogard, and Qviller, 2020: 201)⁴⁶.

Looking at FD2030 from a methodological point of view, its development consisted of the following phases: the first, which began in 2019, of problem definition with a small advisory group directly dependent and meshed in all its steps with the USMC Commander himself; in the second, the integrated planning teams (IPTs) were formed⁴⁷ assessing the state of the “current force” and projection of the future;

41 *Unmanned Ground Vehicle*.

42 The *academy* usually reminds us how important it is to comply in that sense, and not the opposite: that the means define the ways.

43 *Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance*.

44 Or Mission-Oriented Command. A type of command that involves strong initiative by the performers, knowledge of the command’s purpose, and mutual trust to enable decentralized action.

45 *Mosaic warfare* basically consists of disaggregating large, monolithic, multifunctional combat platforms into a multitude of small, monofunctional platforms” (p. 12).

46 Due to its relevance, it will be dealt with exclusively in section 3.5.

47 With the themes: (1) MEU reconfiguration; (2) the Marine Littoral Regiment construct; (3) Maritime Prepositioning Force reconfiguration; (4) aviation in support of the FMF; (5) logistics in support of the FMF; (6) anti-ship capabilities; (7) medium-range air defense capabilities; (8)

“iterative experimentation” followed, then rehearsals and *wargaming* [wargaming]; finally, after approval by the Secretaries of Defense, Navy, and Congress, refinement and implementation proceeded through the Programming, Budgeting, and Execution Process (PPBES) (Macander and Hwang, 2022; DoN, 2020: 5). A milestone that comprises one year within the four-year capability planning cycle, and guides force development and links it budgetarily (DoD, 2017).

Force design is still a choice between options, with their associated advantages, risks and costs. Thus, under the assumption that no additional funding would be received, it was decided to divest itself of what was “unnecessary” for the *Concept*, freeing up valuable resources:

- First of all, with regard to the organic structures: reducing the infantry battalions (-12.5%) and accordingly, their combat and logistic supports. It is accepted that the adversary will be located tens or hundreds of kilometers away, probably on other islands or islets, and in domains not necessarily terrestrial.
- Secondly, in terms of transversal capabilities: discarding armored⁴⁸ and *bridging* (-100%); and reducing amphibious (-33%), tube artillery (-76%), drones without the possibility of being armed and attack and medium transport helicopters (-25%)⁴⁹. Mobility is prioritized in contested areas, but which are not defended by linear sets of obstacles in use (breaching is not required). The aim is to optimize the force’s fire, increasing its range and precision.

The dismissed capabilities, while “prized for their [demonstrated] shock capability and firepower,” reduce the “agility of the force, being of limited value in the emerging maritime operations environment where greater mobility and precision are necessary” (Hoffman, 2020: 3).

In return:

- Boosting its air weapon to 340 F-35B fighters (VTOL⁵⁰) with the ability to operate from expeditionary or improvised take-off points, reinforced with a new in-flight refueling squadron. Refocusing the traditional mission of Marine fighter squadrons from force security and close air support to long-range target neutralization.
- Missile capacity is increased to 21 batteries (+300%). Assuming the new fire-producing backbone.
- Also light-armored reconnaissance (+33%), and unmanned aerial (+100% up to six companies). As a necessary capability for rapid initial entry and terrain information gathering to enable such decentralized deployments.

infantry battalion reorganization; (9) manned-unmanned capability balance; (10) objective network requirements; (11) training and education; and (12) the reserves.

⁴⁸ With the delivery of its 450 battle tanks to the *Army*.

⁴⁹ Assuming a release of \$16 billion in systems and equipment (Macander and Hwang, 2022).

⁵⁰ *Vertical Take-Off and Landing*.

- At the same time, the *Navy* is requested to incorporate 31 amphibious ships of a new “L class”⁵¹, smaller in size, footprint and cost than the current ones, together with their associated platforms for littoral projection and logistical support⁵². It assumes a weakening of the traditional ability to take a beach *in force*, and enhances the decentralized projection of forces of lesser size and logistical burden.

The new FD advocates experimentation and implementation of new structures. One of its protagonists is precisely the backbone of these new capabilities. Combining at battalion level the anti-aircraft (Littoral Anti-Air Battalion), anti-ship combat and multi-domain reconnaissance (Littoral Combat Team) and logistics (Combat Logistics Battalion) capabilities, the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR)⁵³ was formed as the backbone of the aforementioned capabilities (Feickert, 2024). Its atomized mode of action leads, once again, to narrow the center of gravity in the *Marine*.

The high demands this new concept places on young leaders (section chiefs and NCOs) to operate autonomously while handling technically advanced equipment, gives crucial importance to human capital. This has led its commander to identify the tasks of talent management, training and modernization of the education system as priorities, with its own “2030” programs⁵⁴. The aim is thus to retain “the most experienced personnel”, without meaning “the most senior”, in a multidisciplinary effort supported by civilian institutions that also extends to recruitment. It involves a shift from “recruiting to replace” to empowering the most talented, to invest in them and “accelerate their promotion” (DoN, 2023b).⁵⁵

3.6 A brief overview of the criticisms and risks of FD2030

Changes are never without risk. In complex institutions with great “doctrinal inertia” such as armies, these are more easily felt (Frías, 2014). The innovative approach to the military problem described above is only possible after what its leader describes as an “arduous process” accompanied by a “forceful institutional change” (DoN, 2020). Before a contemporary *Syndicate of Discontent*⁵⁶ made up of politicians,

51 “L” referring to *Landing* or “disembarkation” in English.

52 This is not within the USMC’s budgetary purview (being a vulnerable aspect of the program).

53 Also supported by historical references such as the Solomon Islands defense of the Pacific campaign, where battalions with such “multi-domain” capabilities supported *Navy* maneuver by controlling key points (Bruogard, and Qviller, 2020: 203).

54 *Talent Management-2030* and *Training & Education-2030*, respectively.

55 It also proposes to improve morale and quality of life, including “high quality dining rooms” and better coverage of family needs.

56 “Syndicate of Dissent,” an analogy of the group facing Admiral Fisher’s disruptive reforms in the *Royal Navy* in the technologically convulsive pre-WWI decades (Krepinevich, 2023, ch. 6).

journalists, senior officers (active and retired), and industry representatives, Berger justifies himself. Bureaucratic resistance to change is natural in a system “not designed to adapt to the speed that competition demands,” but to “reward programmatic continuity” (in CSIS, 2022, min.6-10).

The generality of the criticisms can be summarized in the following four points (pointing out the replies, if any):

- The first, on what is “no longer able to do”: mainly, the ability to face campaigns such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, or to fight in purely terrestrial scenarios on parity with the *Army* as in Central Europe (Macander and Hwang, 2022). Its excessive “optimization” toward denial leads to such strategic, as well as tactical and cultural, derivatives. Giving the *First to Fight* Corps a defensive focus, where it bases its performance on small units dispersed in islands where the protagonism (main effort) is of long-range fire units, with a role of its infantry merely of security to the deployment, implies a significant loss of maneuverability, entailing long-term effects on its *ethos* (Cancian in The Foundation, 2021).

This criticism, common in official circles, “subjective” and “not validated by any study”, is countered by assuming that the loss of polyvalence is due to strategic imperatives emanating from the NDS. Precisely in the scenario indicated as “more challenging and prioritized”, competitiveness increases “mitigating risk” (Reese *et al.*, 2024)⁵⁷. Moreover, the question about their poor maneuverability (once the force is deployed) is a simplistic criticism from the terrestrial point of view, since effects are now created on the air, maritime and electromagnetic domains. So is the one raised about their poor versatility, which they associate with equipment that is no longer available, and not after analyzing the new doctrinal approach (Hoffman, in The Foundation, 2021, min.55-57).

- The second, which delves into the significance of the transition to defensive. He believes the assumption that the “long range of modern precision weapons” is changing the tide of *warfare* is wrong (McGee, 2021). The same author points out that the *Integrated Deterrence* concept accepts, without sufficient basis, that we are in a “Battle of San Juan Hills” moment⁵⁸. This engagement, which pitted the Spanish and U.S. forces in Cuba, was an obvious milestone (not for those fighting it, and only in retrospect) that demonstrated that a new inflection toward defense in ground combat had occurred⁵⁹.

57 *Think tanks* such as War on the Rocks compile opinion pieces on this shift. Opponents argue excessive strategic risk by focusing “too much on China.”

58 Occurred on July 1, 1898, framed in the Spanish-American War, at the time resulting from the application of the Monroe Doctrine. 800 Spanish soldiers in inferiority of 10 to 1, used positions under cover and trenches, and weapons that already incorporated cordite (with its advantage of not generating smoke), instead of the black powder that the North Americans continued using. As a result, the assailants suffered more than a thousand casualties, obtaining a pyrrhic victory.

59 It would encompass World War I, prevailing for four decades until the advent of the (misnamed) *blitzkrieg*.

Despite this, FD2030, in addition to relying on Krepinevich's view of the defensive advantage afforded by the MPSR, justifies its change factually as well. It claims to be based on the results of iterative *war games* that have recreated the dispute against China. Also, on the already observable consequences of employing such technologies alongside those that *make* the battlefield *transparent*. Tangible cases cited by the advocates of change are the aforementioned Ukrainian and Houthi examples. The simple threat of SLOCs demonstrates that small forces equipped for this purpose⁶⁰ are an unbalancing factor in any conflict.

- Third, because of its excessive audacity. No solution is given to aspects such as the deployment of lethal capabilities in the territory of *security partners* (but not allies, such as Japan), pending future diplomatic actions. Or by placing excessive confidence in unproven technologies, discarding other *battle-proven* technologies such as battle tanks. But especially for not guaranteeing vital logistics in a highly contested environment (Reese *et al.*, 2024).

Although they are justified, the periodic reports published openly on the state of change (*Annual Updates*) indicate that they are identified and represent “a work in progress”, subject to continuous testing and experimentation. In particular, the issue of forward force logistics, from projection to resupply, is announced as unresolved due to new concepts and means to be developed (DoN, 2023a: 1, 13).

- Last but not least, from a financial perspective. That this service, a component of a larger one such as the *Navy*, with its own priorities bent towards its natural demanding task of sea control, in combination with a reigning “budgetary uncertainty” (Berger, 2022), may disable its achievement. Although the DoN does endorse the FD2030, the lack of implementation of a superior one-set⁶¹, which distributes responsibilities in that scenario raises suspicions of duplicities or competences. Precisely, when studied in parallel to the *Army's* concept for Multidomain combat (MDO) a more transcendent question appears: how much A2/AD and amphibious capability the US requires –and can afford– (Stubbs, 2023). To this must be added the ever-present possibility of a further shift in strategic priorities that leaves the USMC “exposed.” The risk of substituting capabilities already scrapped for others in the procurement process is noted.

Be that as it may, evaluating the FD2030 approach in isolation may be considered an exercise lacking objectivity as it does not rest on a higher holistic concept. A true joint guide that overcomes the classic resistance of the services to “joint interdependence”

⁶⁰ In the first example, with littoral craft or land-based anti-ship missiles, limited manned aviation, drones and maritime surface systems.

⁶¹ In the JAM-GC (Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons), as a codification of the previous AirSea Battle since 2015, the allocation of responsibilities between the services is not its object. Anyway, in its language, what is presented here by FD2030 can be understood as the “inner force” facilitating the operation to an “outer force”, bases of action settled by such a concept for contested environments.

always motivated by the budgetary struggle is still pending (Hoffman, 2020: 7; Bruogard, and Qviller, 2020). In this sense, Krepinevich also underlines this error by offering in contrast a case in his view coherent, cooperative, and successful. That of the *AirLand Battle*, as a defensive response to the need to beat the Soviet second echelons (*Follow-on Forces Attack*) during the Cold War⁶². Now “we have nothing like that, our armies don’t know how they are going to defend our position and that of our allies in the Western Pacific.” And in “absence of decision, we find ourselves in *program momentum* [programmatic inertia]” where we “just continue to buy armaments whether we need them or not” (Krepinevich, 2023, ch. 11, p. 439).

Recognition of the new operating environment, strategic precision and consistency has its effects⁶³. General Berger, above all applicable principles, has prioritized “adaptability” to the higher purpose⁶⁴. And so the line of *Evolution on Demand* (Siekiera, 2025)⁶⁵, a work supported by the Marine Corps University, defends the “*barbell*” design⁶⁶ of the FD2030 in the constant dispute between *specialization* and *versatility*. It is argued that in the above criticisms, rooted in “traditional Marine thinking,” there is a clear mismatch between “perceived utility and actual utility.” The doctrinal imposition of constantly seeking conditions that enable the offensive “myopically retain focus at the tactical level,” failing to recognize a “Marine Force that provides a defensive framework for the Navy and other joint forces to go on the offensive at the operational level.” Thus, we get a range of capabilities derived from the prioritization of operations: “defensive, limited crisis response, offensive, and cooperative” in that order (pp. 10-11); and those discarded.

In short, “FD2030 is an ongoing operation”. Or, in the words of Berger’s successor and current USMC commander, General Smith: “FD is a process, not an event”; and thus, reaffirming that it marks the right path and “where we want to get to,” he has removed the “2030” from its designation (War, 2023, min.1-2). And he stresses that it is precisely in its slowdown that the focus of the risk is located (DoN, 2020: 1; 2023a: 16; Berger, 2022).

62 The air and ground services would cooperate to thwart a potential invasion of Europe while, jointly, the *Navy* secured the Atlantic SLOCs.

63 “*The 2018 National Defense Strategy redirected the Marine Corps’ mission focus from countering violent extremists in the Middle East to great power/peer-level competition, with special emphasis on the Indo-Pacific*” (Berger in DoN, 2020: 2).

64 This indeed, is one maxim for Colin S. Gray in strategic planning, another would be “prudence.” Although this is mostly employed by critics of FD2030, this factor can also be seen in the degree of implementation of change itself, balancing the USMC structures that are transformed and those that remain in their original state.

65 From subtitle: “The Changing Roles of the U.S Marine Corps in Twenty-First Century Conflicts and Beyond”.

66 The “dumbbell” strategy is a “risk management framework” in which moderate risks are omitted (center bar), but low and high risks are confronted with intensity (generating a graph in the form of such a sports element).

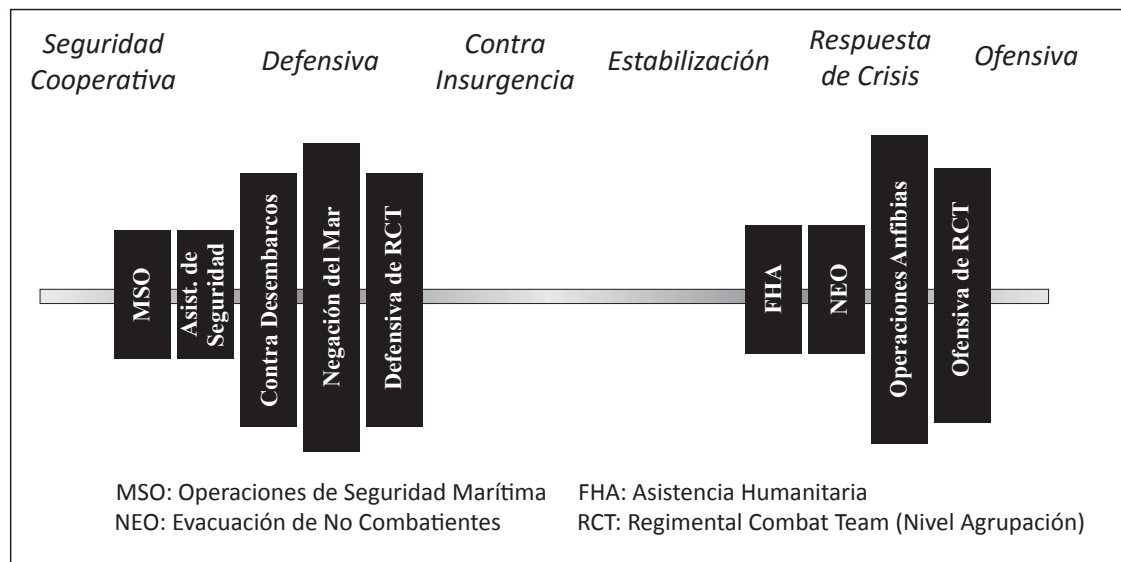


Figure 5. Translation of the graphic representation of the prioritization and weighting (according to the size and location of the “disk”) of the missions covered by FD2030, and what is “left undone” according to the “dumbbell” strategy. Source: Marine Corps University Press

4 A good frame of reference for other defense planning?

In his assessments of organizational change in defense, the focus of his professional career, Krepinevich assiduously quotes British Admiral Fisher⁶⁷ when he dissects the importance of consistency in any strategic process. “We cannot decide what kind of fleet we need until we know how we are going to fight” (Krepinevich, 2023, ch. II, p. 429). FD2030 is believed to do meet that logic in the chaining of directives, being a correct example for “other services on how to conduct force design.” This assessment summarizes the common ground found in the referenced *papers* which, leaving aside the aspects still to be resolved, consider it a good case of how a clear political guideline modulates the priorities of action of its subordinate services.

In order to justify, in qualitative and quantitative terms⁶⁸, the degree of coherence and definition of the process that makes it possible to offer the FD2030 as a comparative framework, Table I (appendix) has been drawn up. Its analysis allows us to affirm that, even in the absence of a joint concept, inevitably detracting from vertical coherence, the profound transformation of the USMC is enabled by the strategic framework of the public documents studied. That this change, far from “incrementalism” or “adaptive” processes (Reese *et al.*, 2024; Jordan, 2017: 205), also entails a paradigm reformulation of a force consolidated and tested as the *Marines* are, is believed to be sufficient proof of the effectiveness of its political and strategic guidance.

67 Head of the *Royal Navy* in two periods between 1904 and 1915. Technologically disruptive period with the continuous appearance of new ship designs and evolution of weapons, such as the *Dreadnought* and torpedoes.

68 Such as the demarcation of interests, prioritization of national objectives or the number of times a state actor or a geographic area considered key by the *academy* is identified.

4.1 *Exploring references for the Spanish case*

The fact that the object of the article was the study of the defense planning of an actor in the struggle for world hegemony, and now we are going to deal with that of an “aspiring strategic actor” (Baqués and Fojón, 2023)⁶⁹, does not prevent us from proposing references in terms of process analysis and support for its strategic definition. By placing the Spanish case in the spotlight, some interesting comparisons can be made. Although we do not intend to be exhaustive, nor do we provide space for extensive justifications, their exploration will serve as a basis for future analyses that will indicate their greater or lesser success.

Its process has been extensively studied by professors such as Colom (2017, 2020, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). In particular, its codification, cycles⁷⁰, and strengths and weaknesses of planning by capabilities in Spain. As a result, conclusions that point to the lack of political-strategic framework, and therefore among other reasons, a traditional reluctance to planning by threats and scenarios in long-term objectives, and as an undesired effect the reluctance to joint planning. Assuming the validity of his line of research, we do not delve here into its sequencing, but rather into the lack of a “strategic framework”.

In a similarly top-down manner to the North American case study, we must begin by contrasting the degree of definition of both political-strategic guides (Table II is provided in the appendix). The autochthonous ESN of 2021, opens with an extensive description of the geopolitical context. It recognizes the established “dynamics of global security transformation” that are at work in the machinery of “geopolitical competition” (Presidency, 2021). As the reality of the 21st century shows, the list of challenges it presents is exhaustive. However, unlike its US counterpart, it seems to focus more on the “manifestations of the problems” (hybrid strategies, rivalry...) than “their causes” (Arteaga, 2022).

69 Or actor that should aspire to be a middle power in the lead.

70 According to OM 37/2005, “the Minister of Defense would promulgate the Defense Policy Directive. This document would outline -following the political precepts previously established in the National Defense Directive- the general lines of action and the guidelines that should guide the process. Upon receipt of this document (...), SEDEF and SUBDEF would start the resource planning by elaborating their forecasts on the planning scenarios in their technological, industrial, financial and personnel aspects. These forecasts would serve as a reference for JEMAD to initiate military planning. Based on the DPD, the forecasts on planning scenarios, the state of operational planning and his own analysis of the situation, he would formulate the Military Planning Directive, with which force planning would begin. This document would be used by the Armies and the Navy to make their estimates on specific requirements and their contribution to joint action. JEMAD would also prepare the Military Strategy Concept, which would present the contribution of the armed forces to the achievement of the objectives identified in the DPD and would serve as a reference for prioritizing military capabilities. Once the specific proposals of the Armies and the Navy were integrated, JEMAD would culminate the joint military planning with the issuance of the Draft Military Capabilities Objective (PROCAM)” (Colom, 2017: 43).

Their “number 1” lines of action are similar: “[a]ssure the military capabilities necessary to provide credible deterrence and effective response across the crisis spectrum” (Presidency, 2021: 74). Both being the same general *modes* of ensuring national defense, any relation of the Spanish case to a regional arc of reference must be made implicitly⁷¹. Indeed, in contrast to the NSS, there is no threat-vector linkage, subtracting a necessary “definition” for the lower levels of planning. Despite the “strategic inflation” of official Spain, (Arteaga, 2022)⁷², the low precision in the definition of threats, interests and objectives, or its lack of pragmatism is pointed out (also by Jordán and Fernández Sola in Baqués and Fojón, 2023; Del Pozo, 2022: 1⁷³; Del Valle, 2021: 8; Calvo Albero, 2020a). Although there seems to be a consensus on the ambiguity of the Spanish Strategy, it must be admitted that it does include regional risks to national security, although without indicating their origins:

“An increase in the assertiveness of *certain actors* and an increase in strategic competition between States, the risk of tensions with a direct impact on national interests and *even on sovereignty itself*, constitutes a serious threat to National Security, the ultimate expression of which could take the form of armed conflict” (ESN, 2021: 56, author’s italics).⁷⁴

Even with the marked multilateralism of⁷⁵ (Presidency, 2021; 2020), national priorities should not be constrained to those of the organizations to which they belong (Fojón, 2022: 2; 2021c: 10) exchanging *ends* for *means* –or regarding geographical orientation (Sánchez Herráez, 2015). Even more, when there is a shift of European military power to the north⁷⁶, as a sort of *pivot to Russia*, and the consequent loss of attention to the southern *front*. If the risks and opportunities derived from the

71 In its 114 pages there is scarcely any mention of neighboring countries: Morocco (three occasions) and Algeria (one), always from the *bona fide* standpoint of neighboring countries. Even less in the new ENSM-24, zero times, although it does prioritize the areas of maritime interest: firstly, those connecting Spanish territories; secondly, the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific, without further specification (2024: 33).

72 This is in addition to the National Maritime Security Strategy (ENSM) 2024.

73 Del Pozo (2022: 11) calls for “a clear, dispassionate and unbending language when pointing out possible threats, (...) which hardly makes it a document susceptible to publicity, unlike the Strategic Concepts that are periodically issued, both in Spain and in NATO or the European Union. It is said that there are states that do not make them public, thus implying that they either do not have them or are obscurantist (...), the issuance of an open one does not exempt from the need to have a classified and concrete one”. From this, it could be inferred that strategic ambiguity should only be projected if that is the purpose of the communication.

74 He continues: “This situation is exacerbated by institutional fragility and gaps in some nearby regions.”

75 That seems to confuse a means with an end (Jordán in Baqués and Fojón, 2023: 67; Calvo Albero, 2020a: 7-8).

76 Following Moscow’s revisionist actions in the last decade and a half, countries such as Poland and Germany emerge as land-based military powers, and the Baltics strengthen sharply.

“great crossroads”⁷⁷ in which Spain is located are made explicit, the formulation of its “problem” could gain definition, especially when it may be a “non-shared” one.

Academic studies such as *La realidad geopolítica de España: Hacia el estatus de actor estratégico* (coordinated by Baqués and Fojón, 2023), and its recent complement *La ambición estratégica de España* (coordinated by García Blázquez, 2025) attempt to provide definition to the indigenous strategy:

- Understanding that Spain is an entity “open to the sea, due to geographical imperatives”⁷⁸ with as many advantages as responsibilities. Such as the control of one of the most relevant global *choke points*⁷⁹ framed in the Canary Islands-Estrecho-Balearic Islands (CEB) axis⁸⁰, or the protection of the SLOCs that affect its flows (because it supplies itself “energetically” and “trades with the world” through this route) (Baqués and Fojón, 2023: 216).
- Defining neighboring territorial assertiveness. Of Rabat over the African territories and the Canary Islands EEZ, and of Algiers over the Balearic Islands, reinforced by the accelerated arms race between the two (Baqués and Fojón, 2023: 56, 98-99; also in Arteaga, 2022; Baqués *et al.*, 2021; Colom, Pulido, Guillamó, 2021; Martínez Gimeno, 2020; Jordán, 2018, 2021; and Moral, 2017)⁸¹. Or the need for a guide for action in the face of the “coming perfect storm” as a metaphor for the “catastrophic” vectors of departure from the Sahel also fueled by the “Africanization of jihadism” (Calvo Albero, 2024b; Molina, Tamames, 2024: 29; Sánchez Herráez, 2021).

In short, contributions that seek to mitigate the lack of official definition, so necessary for the coherent development of subordinate strategies. Inevitably, these starting limitations lead to “the relative indefiniteness of the objectives raised in the political guidelines proposed in the National Defense Directives or –at least in the public summaries– the Defense Policy Directives and the vagueness of the approaches proposed for their achievement” (Colom, 2017: 47).

77 Qualified as *second best* according to Mahan’s theory, implicitly a “geopolitical pivot” according to Brzezinski, or its potential as the western end of Spykman’s *rimland*.

78 With its 8,000 kilometers of coastline, 1,040,000 square kilometers of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), its two archipelagos and African seats.

79 The ESN mentions the Strait only once, as a reference to organized crime, and four times in ENSM-24 (two descriptively and two in reference to the risk of accidents and the need for maritime traffic management. Instead, the exhaustive geopolitical description of what this *choke point* entails is proposed in *Cuadernos de Pensamiento Naval* (Fojón, 2024: 94-95).

80 Partially identified when mentioning SLOCs between Spanish territories, and without specifying their geostrategic effects, in ENSM-24, p. 33.

81 Qualified as a “threat” by López Díaz and Aláez (in *Cuadernos de Estrategia*, 2024: 67) and Del Pozo (2022: 10); that, at the same time, both are interconnected trading partners with Spain that represent the “last bastion of regional stability on the southern flank” in the face of African jihadism (Molina, Tamames, 2024: 29).

The risk of subordinate plans (ultimately force designs) being drafted in a “strategic vacuum lacking political endorsement” is underlined. To overcome them, implicit strategies, sometimes followed by “instinctive planning” of the Spanish services, must be implemented (Colom, 2020: 809; 2021b). As a consequence: unlike the FD2030 case study where threats and origins are related and geographical spaces are prioritized, the enunciation of the “problem”⁸² becomes more difficult and may invalidate the operational concepts that try to solve it. In addition, the risk of misalignment of defense efforts with national interests increases. That central leadership is the one that should mitigate that the Spanish *aestrategia* [sic] leads to a response based on the tempting “multipurpose” force design (Del Pozo, 2022; Fojón, 2019: 6).

The origin of the lack of strategic clarity is not due to a loss of vertical coherence as a studied variable (table II of the annex shows positively its continuity). In fact, this “is fully coherent with the Spanish strategic culture that would rule out the use of military power in almost any circumstance” (Laborie in García Blazquez, 2025: 250). Its localization requires studying the case in a domestic key. To this end, the neoclassical realist school offers a good framework for future research. With the behavior of the State and its decision-making process as a dependent variable conditioned by the degree of strategic culture of the elites, social cohesion or the relative importance given to national defense issues⁸³. All this is accentuated by “polarization” and “lack of consensus” (pp. 251-254). The latter coincides with the diagnosis of Lamo de Espinosa in “A Confused Spain” (epilogue of his latest work, 2021), an actor suffering from a “disoriented foreign policy” due to internal dissent.

Not all the references of the case study are applicable to the indigenous case (wide difference in strategic assertiveness, or simply that Spain has no declared adversaries). Among the potentially valid ones, two stand out:

- The first, on the strategic-political objectives that frame the generation of capabilities in a constrained financial environment. Even considering the “budgetary uncertainty” of the USMC to be less severe than the “chronic budgetary insufficiency” of the Spanish Armed Forces (Enseñat, 2024: 71-76), which in the former has led to a disengagement of the “non-useful”, prior to the development of the force design, provides clarity on its degree of strategic definition. It also provides clarity on what it implies from the point of view of the trust placed in its industrial ecosystem (which must also guide the long-term defense strategy) and the procurement process. A mechanism that must incorporate, as soon as possible, new systems in the gap of others that are no longer there. A situation that leaves the door open to discuss whether it would be applicable in the indigenous case.

⁸² Although FD2030 does not start from an official statement of its operational problem, the strategic definition that serves as a framework is such that it allows for its coherent development and implementation.

⁸³ Although they are not discussed in detail, they will be the subject of future research.

- The second, on the force design itself. Analogous to the positive assessments made about FD2030 (explicitly Hoffman, or implicitly Krepinevich), a good “conceptual effort” such as Force 35 of the Army (ET) can be interpreted as a mere budgetary justification in the traditional inter-service rivalry (Baqués and Fojón, 2023: 217-219; see Table II of the annex)⁸⁴. The lack of “central leadership” that integrates “needs and solutions” hinders the development of coherent operational concepts, prevents doctrine from being the real driver of change and progress towards the whole.⁸⁵

A better definition of Spain’s role and risks would allow a response that is less oriented to the inertial “planning by capabilities”, inflexible and inert to the “strategic culture of potential adversaries”, and more oriented to the operating environment and “future conflicts”, already present (Colom, 2017: 12). Indeed, a “good strategy is one from which the necessary force can be deduced” in addition to setting the strategic scope it should enable, and not the other way around (Pérez Ramírez, 2024: 99). Coordinated and complementary force requirements for joint action would be enabled. It would reduce friction in the budgetary competition between services, indicating which capabilities are really needed, and which have to be dispensed with. In short, it would allow to evolve from the multipurpose as a necessary systemic response to the lack of definition to a highly competitive military tool.

5 Conclusions

Military change processes (whether profound transformation or mere adaptation) must be supported by planning that starts from a clear political orientation. The USMC’s FD2030, as a strategic product, proves to be such a case. Only strong strategic guidance, followed by coherent planning, can have enabled such a bold concept.

Changes are never without risks. Its emphasized orientation to the Indo-Pacific context accepts some as relevant as the loss of polyvalence or the renunciation of shock power. Without underestimating those inherent to any innovation that embraces an incipient technological revolution. This is only justified when, in the priority geographic demarcation for its national interests, it is believed to increase competitiveness.

Consequently, its new asymmetric approach migrates from dominance to lethality. And from the traditional pursuit of the offensive at the tactical level to the defensive in the key to multi-domain denial, now allowing the *Marines* to “sink ships”, among other physical and immaterial effects, jointly exploited at the operational level. An

84 It could also have been culminated with the Armed Vision 2050.

85 The quotation marks belong to the Spanish authors, although the two American authors could have been almost reliably referenced because of their identical assessment in their case. Also, out of this context, in Frías, 2014.

innovative change whose driving force is doctrinal. Thus, the USMC of “2030” aims to become the most competitive military tool to contribute to the resolution of the main “operational problem” of its Defense: that of deterrence and containment of China.

The *vertical coherence* and *strategic definition* demonstrated throughout the FD2030 process allows it to be offered as a framework for other force designs.

In contrast, the lesser definition of interests-objectives, risks and their origins, together with the lack of geographic prioritization, as a result of the domestic conditioning of Spanish political-strategic thinking, seems to hinder an effective and efficient force design. That is, one whose capabilities are focused on the genuinely own operational environment, not necessarily multipurpose as a natural systemic response to the aforementioned ambiguity, and which have been jointly coordinated between services. These characteristics are even more essential when dealing with a reduced and underfunded Armed Forces.

Annex

Table I, The U.S. Strategic Process through FD2030⁸⁶.

| Tabla I | Fines | Modos | Medios | Grado de definición |
|----------|---|--|---|--|
| NSS 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Garantizar el liderazgo internacional estadounidense como mejor servicio a la prosperidad y seguridad de su pueblo (p. 7). - Asegurar la fortaleza del proyecto estadounidense de un mundo libre, abierto, próspero y seguro (p. 7). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fortalecer a las democracias en su competición con las autocracias y reforzar las instituciones multilaterales (p. 7). - Superar a China en la competición promoviendo un libre y abierto Indo-Pacífico (pp. 23-25, 37). - Reforzar las fortalezas propias (pp. 14-16). - Constituir coaliciones fuertes (pp. 16-19). - Modernizar y fortalecer la herramienta militar estadounidense (pp. 20-23). - Disuasión integrada (p. 22). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diplomacia como constructora de coaliciones (p. 37, 40). - Economía e inversión para mejorar fortalezas (p. 14-20). - Fuerzas Armadas como herramienta para competir y asegurar el proyección estadounidense (pp. 20-23). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relaciona vectores y amenazas. - Establece demarcación geográfica de intereses. - Término «China» o «PRC» aparece 57 veces. |
| NDS 2022 | <p>Coherencia vertical: Recoge y desarrolla la voluntad presidencial del <i>pivot to Asia</i>. Ofrece un marco definido y priorizado para el desarrollo de estrategias subordinadas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proteger el interés nacional «frente a la creciente amenaza multidominio que representa China» (p. III, 7). - «Disuadir de ataques estratégicos contra los EEUU, sus aliados y socios» (p. 7) - «Disuadir las agresiones, mientras nosotros preparamos para prevalecer, si fuera necesario, en un conflicto – priorizando el desafío de China en la región del Indo-Pacífico (p. 7). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - «Desarrollar, combinar y coordinar las fortalezas propias» (p. IV) y «construir un ecosistema de defensa y una fuerza Conjunta resilientes» (p. 7). - Disuasión Integrada [Integrated Deterrence]» (p. 22). - «Campaigning [Proyección y Despliegues Adelantados] permanentes» (p. IV). - «Reforzar la disuasión nuclear regional en el Indo-Pacífico» (p. 15). - «Arraigrair nuestra estrategia en aliados y socios, avanzando en los objetivos regionales (pp. 14-17). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fuerza Conjunta dimensionada y a través del «proceso de Planeamiento de Fuerza [Force Planning Construct]» y orientada a «áreas operacionales clave» (p. 17-18). - Una Fuerza que prioriza las cualidades de «lealtad, sostenibilidad, resiliencia, supervivencia y respuesta ágil» (p. 18). - Triada nuclear renovada y fortalecida (pp. 20-21). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relaciona vectores y amenazas. - Define entorno operativo. - Orienta esfuerzos a teatros operacionales. - Término «China» o «PRC» aparece 101 veces. - No define el problema operacional (Krepinevich, 2023, cap. 11). |
| JOC | <p>Coherencia vertical: Focaliza en la competición con China, concretando el modo para contenerla (Disuasión Integrada) y orienta a la Fuerza a las áreas operacionales clave.</p> <p>No se dispone de un Concepto Operativo Conjunto (JOC) de referencia para el problema operacional del Indo-Pacífico (Krepinevich, 2023, cap. 11; Hoffman, 2020).</p> | | | |
| FD2030 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ofrecer una fuerza en complemento a la Navy capaz de «facilitar operaciones conjuntas», en especial en el Indo-Pacífico (p. 4). - Ofrecer una fuerza capaz de «competir y ganar en la zona gris» (p. 4). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Del «inlands» al «littoral», de enfrentar extremistas a la competición entre potencias (p. 2). - «Transformar el modelo tradicional de organizar-entrenar-equipar a la fuerza» (p. 2). - Conceptos de Stand-In Force y EABO. - Aplicar los planes Training & Education y Talent Management 2030. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fuerza Objetivo: Una fuerza letal, proyectable y sostenible en áreas contestadas, y distribuida, deshaciéndose de capacidades no alineadas (pp. 7-10, y punto 3.5 de este trabajo). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Detalla en cómo afecta el nuevo entorno operativo del Indo-Pacífico. - Prioriza campaña potencial. - Término «Indo-Pacífico» aparece 8 veces. - Ordena deshacerse de capacidades y medios. |
| | <p>Coherencia vertical: Prioriza la campaña marítima, asumiendo riesgo de pérdida de polivalencia, ganando especialización, por ajustarse al propósito superior.</p> | | | |

86 As a quantitative contribution to the concreteness of the document, two key terms are established (those based on the presidential guide of the *pivot to Asia*): “China” - “PRC” and “Indo-Pacific”. The “degree of definition” column indicates their occurrence.

Table II, The Spanish strategic process (studied up to Force 35)⁸⁷.

| Tabla II | Fines | Modos | Medios | Grado de definición |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|
| ESN 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proteger libertad y bienestar de los ciudadanos, garantizar la defensa de España y valores constitucionales, y contribuir colectivamente a la seguridad internacional (p. 39). - Promover «seguridad y desarrollo en el Magreb y Oriente Próximo», y también de prevención en el Sahel (p. 41). <p>Coherencia vertical: Desarrolla las misiones constitucionales y los transforma en ejes de actuación.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tres ejes: Proteger, Promover, Participar (p. 70). - Tres L.A (Proteger): «Asegurar capacidades militares» para disuadir y defensa autónoma; reforzar defensa con I+D+i; desarrollar sector industrial de defensa (p. 75). - Multilateralismo reforzado (p. 96). - Enfoque integral (p. 105). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sistema de Seguridad Nacional y Gestión de Crisis (p. 104). - Capacidad de disuadir creíble (p. 56). - Capacidad de defensa autónoma (p. 56). - «Mayor protagonismo en OTAN». - «enfátizar flanco Sur», «contribución a operaciones» (p. 100). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extensa definición panorama y de riesgos. - No relaciona origen-amenaza. - Aseveridad regional riesgo a soberanía España. - Términos «clave»: 1 vez (sin relación estratégica). |
| DDN 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proteger al conjunto de la sociedad, su Constitución y valores (p. 5). - Garantizar la soberanía, independencia e integridad de España y ordenamiento constitucional. <p>Coherencia vertical: Continúa con las misiones constitucionales, pero no ahonda en la priorización geográfica (apuntada a grandes rasgos en la ESN).</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Credibilidad. Misiones permanentes de las FAS. - Multilateralismo, socio responsable y solidario. - Seguridad según «modelo propio» (p. 2). - Contribuir al Sistema de Seguridad Nacional. - Mitigar consecuencias cambio climático (Agenda 2030) y fomento «seguridad humana». | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - FAS, como «instrumento especializado ante cualquier reto de naturaleza militar». - Centro Nacional Inteligencia. - Unidad Militar Emergencias. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extensa definición panorama y de riesgos. - No relaciona origen-vector-amenaza. - No menciona Estados. - Términos «clave»: 0 veces. |
| DPD 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - «1. Garantizar, bajo la dirección del Gobierno, la seguridad de sus ciudadanos». - «2. Aplicar un multilateralismo eficaz». - «3. Estabilidad del Mediterráneo, Norte África y Sahel». <p>Coherencia vertical: Recoge los marcos geográficos de interés (que no intereses y objetivos) de la ESN, pero no los prioriza. Recoge el multilateralismo como modo prioritario.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - «Contribuir a la Seguridad Nacional como un todo», atendiendo a las misiones permanentes en los espacios de soberanía, y a las exteriores multilateralmente como socio parte de una defensa colectiva. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - FAS con capacidades autónomas. - FAS con capacidad de contribuir internacionalmente. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Define regiones de interés, no Estados, y las acciones de contribución general a la seguridad. - Términos «clave»: 0 veces. |
| CEFAS 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disuasión y Defensa ante amenazas compartidas y no compartidas. - Proyección y Estabilidad en torno a nuestras fronteras. - Aportar a la seguridad en su sentido más amplio. <p>Coherencia vertical: Desarrolla actuación ante amenazas no compartidas (DPD) y la necesidad de defensa autónoma (ESN), sin concretar origen. Preferencia actuación aliada.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - «Defensa autónoma» (p. 18). - «Defensa compartidas»: Esfuerzo aliado. - Multilateralismo y coaliciones ad-hoc (p. 18). - Contribución al Sistema de Seguridad Nacional. - Desarrollo Planes Estratégicos por Líneas. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - FAS que disuaden y pueden actuar en todo el espectro, incluido en la zona gris. - Fuerza Conjunta creíble, equilibrada, integrada, versátil, capaz y sostenible, mediante un esfuerzo logístico acorde al nivel de ambición de la DPD (p. 30). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extensa definición del «escenario». - No prioriza zonas de actuación geográfica. - Términos «clave»: 0 veces. |
| FUERZA 35 (ET) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constituir al ET de 2035 como componente esencial de la Fuerza Conjunta. <p>Coherencia vertical: Como concepto coherente verticalmente, ante la indefinición, propone modernizar (más que transformar) de manera balanceada y equilibrada.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aportando a la Fuerza Conjunta capacidades únicas y multidominio (p. 5, 7). - Interoperabilidad con aliados (p. 6). - «Transformando las fuerzas terrestres» (pp. 16-21). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fuerza terrestre tecnológicamente avanzada (p. 6) con elevada calidad de personal (p. 7). - Brigada «como sistema de combate integral», que aplica Mission Command. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extensa definición del «panorama global y el espacio de batalla». - No prioriza escenarios. - Términos «clave»: 0 veces. |

87 As a quantitative contribution to the concreteness of the document, two *key terms* are established (those that every Spanish strategic guide should contain based on the work “Towards the status of strategic actor”: “Strait” and “Canary Islands”). In the column “degree of definition” their occurrences are indicated.

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Article received: February 9, 2025

Article accepted: May 29, 2025
